Chapter 8

Bringing “the Periphery” into Focus: Social Interaction between Baltic Finns and the Svear in the Viking Age and Crusade Period (c.800 to 1200)

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One of the characteristics of the period 800 to 1200 A.D. in the Northern Hemisphere was close interaction between the Eastern Slavs and eastern Scandinavia. This bipolar focus is too myopic, however, and does not consider other ethnic groups or the intricate process behind political and economic change. Also difficult to account for are those actors who are not so well documented in the written sources and have left less conspicuous material culture to posterity. Some of the groups are found within larger language sets of the Sami and Baltic Finns. From a Swedish perspective, “eastern” contacts can refer to any people from Finland, Russia, or the Baltic states. Sami, Finns, Karelians, Tavasts, Ves’, Vots, Izhora, and Estonians are repeatedly studied within the framework of a single, homogeneous political development. This generalized focus blurs the intricate historical interaction between the Svear and the regions mentioned. There is a need for a defined geographical provenance for artefacts from “the east”, as well as for interpretations of the social process behind their use. Artefact patterns are not haphazardly distributed. Distant regions and individuals were interrelated during the Viking Age and Crusade Period in ways that we today might believe improbable.

In connection with efforts to uncover a more heterogeneous past, there have been attempts to synthesize the fragments of archaeological and historical sources, in order to recreate pre-modern globalities. In post-modern discourse, light has been shed on local communities as a response to histories written from a national, exclusionary perspective; however, by interpreting minorities and neglected historical groups only on a local level, there is a risk of imagining them as incapacitated actors. Instead of defining them as fringe groups, they should be integrated in the historical synthesis of societal change.

The material culture of the Baltic Finns has not been thoroughly scrutinized in its Swedish contexts. The lack of knowledge about the archaeological sources has led to ignorance of the Baltic Finns’ social and historical background, in parallel to the absence of Finno-Ugrians from the discussion of the history of Kievan Rus’. In brief, this chapter will address this lack by exploring

1 Stang 1981; Uino 2006.
the interaction – focusing on the period from c.800 to 1200 – between Baltic Finns and the Svear, the Germanic-speaking group then living in Sweden’s present-day Lake Mälaren District. First, a short survey will be presented of the Baltic-Finnic groups considered to have been in direct contact with the Mälaren area. Second, the topographic and chronological distribution of the artefacts emanating from these groups will be examined in order to interpret the social action behind them. Third, a historical interpretation will be proposed for the social and political actions taken by Baltic-Finnic groups and the Svear, based on archaeological and written sources. Exchange between the Baltic-Finnic populations and Scandinavia can be seen in the archaeological record as cultural expressions of social change in a wider network; to increase our insight into how identities and networks were created, the focus must be set to narrow periods of time and precise geographical regions, thereby uncovering the process itself. In that process, Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian groups played a major role.2

It is important to begin with the question of which perspective we adopt when interpreting ancient social communication. It is clear that the Scandinavians of the Viking Age have attracted more scholarly attention than the agrarian, cattle-breeding, and fur-hunting forest people of north-eastern Europe. Viking Age material culture can be blinding in its complexity. In the analyses, world-system concepts of core and periphery also distort the interpretations. Critique of this dichotomization of interaction has brought other theoretical and methodological perspectives to the fore.3 The voices against a systemic approach claim that the concept of “core” and “periphery” intentionally or unintentionally structures our understanding of the past as unilateral. Thus, acculturation in the “receiving” group becomes a predominant perspective and foreign artefacts found in the “periphery” stand as signs of “core” dominance. Strong cases against this view have been made in Greek, Roman, and American historical archaeology.4 These studies set a new archaeological agenda, drawn towards multilateral communication, agency, social identity negotiation and practice. Most important is the stress on the impact of local agency. Interaction involves a variety of social factions, among newcomers as well as residents. Contacts are always negotiated, unless we can see a total annihilation of the original population, which is not the case in the geographic area of our study. Material culture played a significant role in the creation of new identities. Changes in the archaeological record, quantitatively and qualitatively, expose

2 Callmer 1986; Callmer 2000; Callmer 2008; Makarov 2006; Martin 1986.
3 Stein 1998; Stein 1999; Stein 2002.